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COMMENTARY

A Case Against Spiritual Intelligence

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Whether spirituality should be considered an intelligence depends upon definitions and criteria. Emmons tends to lump together different aspects of spirituality and also various facets of psychology. In my response, I demonstrate the advantages of teasing these concepts apart. Those aspects of spirituality that have to do with phenomenological experience or with desired values or behaviors are best deemed external to the intellectual sphere. A residue concerning the capacity to deal with existential issues may qualify as an intelligence. Emmons's overall enterprise is plausible and he raises many intriguing issues (e.g., sacredness, problem solving, the unifying potential of religion) that merit further investigation.

In the good old days, the concept of intelligence used to be unproblematic within academic psychology. The important niche occupied by intelligence was established by the success of the intelligence test, as first devised by Alfred Binet around the turn of the century, and then developed into an efficient, pragmatic instrument by psychometricians like Lewis Terman and David Wechsler (see Gardner, Kornhaber, & Wake, 1996, for a brief history). In light of this success, psychologists felt little need to create a theory of intelligence or to revise the tests of intelligence in a major way. Most were content to accept E. G. Boring's well-known assertion, in the heyday of scientific operationalism, that "intelligence is what the tests test." According to this consensus view, intelligence is a single capacity, often abbreviated as "g" for general intelligence; intelligence is largely inborn and there-

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fore difficult to alter; and psychologists can measure intelligence, from early in a subject's life through the administration of circumscribed instruments called IQ tests (cf. Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

During the last 2 decades, the quiet consensus among psychologists has been rudely disrupted. New lines of investigation within neuroscience, cognitive science, anthropology, and psychology itself, combined with societal pressures, have challenged nearly every tenet about intelligence. Neuroscience has demonstrated the modular nature of the brain's (and presumably the mind's) organization; cognitive science has investigated the nature of expert knowledge in different domains; cross-cultural studies have revealed the quite different attitudes and analyses of intellect that have developed around the planet; psychologists have developed competing theories of intelligence; and social critiques of the possible biases built into psychometric instruments have all combined to put the "Intelligence Establishment" on the defensive, perhaps for the first time in a century.

Most revisions launched within psychology have attempted to play by the psychometrician's rules. That is, they have been based on tests—usually short-answer instruments—that tap the problem-solving capacities of subjects. Those who are critical of the standard view of intelligence favor a wide variety of questions or problems, and analyze the data in such a way as to call attention to the variety of intellectual factors: crystallized versus fluid intelligence (Horn, 1989); verbal versus mathematical versus spatial intelligence (Thurstone, 1938; Vernon, 1956); and contextual versus experiential versus computational intelligence (Sternberg, 1985), to cite three familiar examples.

My own work on multiple intelligences has proceeded in a different way (Gardner, 1993, 1999). Spurning tests and test scores, I have instead posed the question: How did the brain/mind evolve over many thousands of years, in order to allow individuals (and the species) to survive across a range of environments? Armed with this question, and drawing on data collected in the several sciences cited earlier, I initially identified seven forms of intelligence. In addition to the linguistic and logical-mathematical forms of intelligence that are at a premium in the schools, I proposed five additional intelligences (here listed along with specimen individuals who exemplify each intelligence): musical (composer, performer); spatial (sailor, architect); bodily-kinesthetic (athlete, dancer, surgeon); interpersonal (therapist, salesperson); and intrapersonal (individual with keen introspective skills). Recently, I have garnered evidence in favor of an eighth intelligence—that of the naturalist, the individual who readily recognizes patterns in the flora and fauna in the wild. I have considered evidence in favor of a ninth, or spiritual intelligence, only to conclude that this putative form of intelligence is problematic. In the process, however, I have become convinced that there may be an existential intelligence, that captures at least part of what individuals mean when they speak of spiritual concerns (see Gardner, 1999, for further discussion of these issues).

Clearly, in this endeavor, I am wrestling with many of the same issues as Emmons (this issue). Let me begin my commentary by affirming that Emmons's project is an eminently reasonable one and that he approaches it in a plausible way. Because I have reached a different conclusion, I will first recapitulate my own analysis, and then indicate where I agree with and where I differ from Emmons's enterprise.

I find it useful to distinguish among three connotations of the concept "spiritual." The first refers to the ability to realize certain physical states, such as those involved in meditation and other experiments with control of consciousness. Without doubt, such states exist and exhibit clear physiological concomitants. In my view, these states involve control over one's body and so are best thought of as expressions of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence.

The second aspect of spirituality has to do with the attainment of certain phenomenological states. The spiritual individual, on this account, feels "at one" with the universe, or loses himself in an oceanic state, or experiences a special link to God. Again, I have no doubt that such states are genuine, although I am uncertain about whether I have attained them myself. However, I do not want to include within the definition of an intelligence a certain "felt experience." Such feelings, I submit, are not intrinsic to the actual intelligence. Three individuals may evince exactly the same proficiency in the area of mathematics: The first describes feelings of unity with the cosmos; the second reports feelings of anxiety and pain, followed by a moment of release when a proof is achieved; the third reports no distinctive feelings whatsoever. On my analysis, all three are expressing their mathematical intelligence equivalently; they are differing in feeling states, which are best considered external to the intellectual realm.

"Core" to the intellectual realm is the capacity to carry out certain kinds of computations. Linguistic intelligence computes the sounds and sights of language; spatial intelligence computes positions and perspectives of entities in space; interpersonal intelligence computes the status, attitudes, and motivations of other individuals in relation to oneself; and so on. Each intelligence evolved because of the desirability of performing these computations efficiently. It seems to me that one aspect, or module, of mind may have evolved to perform computations (loosely speaking) on elements that transcend normal sensory perception, perhaps because they are too large or too small to be directly apprehended. I have labeled this form of intelligence "existential" because it seems yoked to the fact of our existence as individuals in the cosmos and our capacity to puzzle over that fact.

Somewhat to my surprise, "existential intelligence" qualifies well as an intelligence in light of the eight criteria that I have set forth in my writings (Gardner, 1993, chap. 4). Youngsters the world over raise fundamental questions about existence—Who are we?; Where do we come from?; What are we made of?; Why do we die?; and these questions are captured in symbolic systems such as myth, art, poetry, philosophy, and religion. Some individuals seem precocious in their capac-

ity to pose such cosmic questions whereas others are mired in the mundane. There is little evidence for existential tendencies in nonhuman primates, but our own evolutionary antecedents, such as the Neanderthal, evinced signs of concern (if not “ultimate concern”) in their burial rites.

My hesitation about proclaiming a ninth or existential intelligence derives chiefly from the lack of convincing evidence about brain structures and processes dedicated to this form of computation. As Emmons indicates, there are some hints about parts of the brain that may be important for investing significance in objects, and that may be linked to hyper- or hyporeligious behavior. However, in truth, such issues have not yet been much studied by neuroscientists, and so it is unclear whether these tendencies simply reflect a broader philosophical frame of mind, or whether they actually focus on capacities that can properly be limited to the existential or spiritual realm. For that reason, I have preferred to remain in a “holding pattern” and to speak, somewhat whimsically, of “8½ intelligences.”

Having presented my own take on issues of spiritual or existential intelligence, let me now turn directly to Emmons’s analysis. In several respects, I agree with and have gained from his own searching study of the spiritual domain. I particularly like his suggestion that the realm of the spiritual may provide a resource on which individuals may draw when they are trying to solve a problem. “Problem solving” is central to most concepts of intelligence, including mine, but the notion that spiritual considerations may facilitate problem solving is a novel and provocative one.

Here, the psychologist in me calls for an “unpacking” of a pregnant suggestion. Are there ways in which one can show that spiritual resources are being drawn on? How are they being drawn on? Do they necessarily lead to better or swifter problem solutions, or might they be misleading? Which sources or resources can substitute for spiritual ones? In short, can one offer a computational (or procedural) account of the invoking of spiritual resources in the formulation or solving of a problem?

I am also sympathetic to Emmons’s proposal that the various facets of spirituality may cluster together. Such coalescence seems to me to be a characteristic of intelligences, more broadly; they each consist of various separable core operations which, given the nature of human experience, tend to accrue and to become organized into a totality. Thus, musical intelligence entails sensitivity to harmony, rhythm, timbre, overall composition; interpersonal intelligence comprises understanding of motivation, ability to work cooperatively, interpretation of others’ goals. In each case, individuals might initially excel in just one of these core components; but sustained functioning in the world tends to facilitate these core components working together. I endorse Emmons’s suggestion that the realm (or domain) of religion is constructed precisely so as to encourage a concatenation of the several facets of spirituality.

Attention to the sacred, and the capacity to demarcate certain aspects of life as sacred, seems to me to call attention to an important and neglected aspect of human

psychology. Again, I am stimulated to raise further questions. How do we know what is sacred? Do parents and transitional objects qualify in early life? Friends and hobbies and favored vacation spots later on? Are there independent grounds for delineating what is sacred and separating it from the profane? To what extent can the characteristics of the sacred be discerned across historical periods or cultural divides?

Having indicated those portions of Emmons's analysis that I find instructive, I should now mention those that appear to me to be problematic. From my vantage point, it is very important to keep separate the *power* of computational capacities, from the *uses* to which they are put. Both Goethe and Goebbels displayed excellent intelligence in the German language: Goethe used his linguistic gifts to write estimable poetry and drama whereas Goebbels used his talent to foment hatred. Both Mao Zedong and Mahatma Gandhi were gifted in the interpersonal domain, and yet, again, they made quite divergent uses of these talents. In his otherwise admirable book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman (1995) lays out the five features of this form of intelligence but then, from my vantage point, muddies the water by failing to distinguish adequately between high levels of analysis and performance, on the one hand, and the proclivity to lead an admirable life on the other.

Emmons also blurs the line between the descriptive and the prescriptive. For the most part, he focuses on abilities that all of us have to some degree, and that certain individuals possess to a pronounced extent. But at other times, he focuses on capacities that he clearly believes are admirable (e.g., humility). I endorse analyses that make a sharp distinction between these two realms. Whether we like it or not, among the individuals who seem to have had strong spiritual intelligence (in Emmons's sense) are ones who are frankly antisocial, psychopathic, or to use an old-fashioned word, evil. In his book *Feet of Clay*, Anthony Storr (1996) illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing between those who use their spiritual intelligence in a creative, as opposed to destructive, manner.

Emmons builds part of his argument on behavioral genetics—a line of analysis that should be invoked only with utmost caution in the human realm. There is no question that the techniques of behavioral genetics are valuable when brought to bear on data that have been obtained under strictly controlled conditions—for example, in studies of plant or animal breeding. Such studies are, however, quite properly forbidden with human beings. Even the most reliable studies with humans—those comparing identical twins with fraternal twins, or identical twins reared together with identical twins reared apart—do not satisfy the requirements for controlled experiments. Consider, for example, that all identical twins share the same womb environment for approximately 9 months, and that even identical twins reared apart are not randomly assigned to environments. Consider, as well, that twins are aware of their twinship and have the prerogative of either exploiting or rebelling against this status. None of these conditions can be adequately controlled. And so the fact that religiosity seems to some extent to be

a heritable trait cannot serve as a basis for conclusions about the brain or genetic basis of spirituality. There are simply too many steps between the data and the conclusions.

Emmons suggests that humility may be an adaptive characteristic. I value humility greatly, and wish that I and those around me would display more of it. However, I am not convinced that humility is in general an adaptive trait. Indeed, as I observe life around us in the United States today, it seems far easier to mount a case in favor of the proposition that pride or hubris is adaptive. At any rate, it is difficult to envision tests that could allow us to draw confident conclusions about the relevant value of humility versus hubris in different contexts at different historical times—let alone to try to reason backwards to the social situation that obtained in small bands of *Homo erectus* or *Homo habilis* living in East Africa millions of years ago.

I think that it would be useful to observe a distinction that I have come to make between an intelligence and a domain. An intelligence is a biological potential to analyze certain kinds of information in certain kinds of ways. Intelligences are activated, or not, depending on the culture in which one lives and one's own value system. Domains (or disciplines or crafts) are organized activities in a culture wherein one can rank individuals in terms of their relative expertise. Academic disciplines, arts, crafts, and hobbies are all examples of domains.

Applied to the present topic, spiritual intelligence would entail a potential to pay attention to content that is deemed sacred and to do so in certain ways (e.g., through transcendent fusion with sacred materials). The society supplies various domains, including organized religion or meditative practices, within which the individual can choose to utilize the spiritual intelligence. On rare occasions, an individual might create his or her own domain.

On this analysis, one can then consider the various domains available in the culture (ranging from Judaism to Shamanism to yoga) and probe the extent to which various intelligences are (or are not) brought to bear as an individual enters and then masters a given domain. Alerted to this distinction, one is less likely to confound what is essentially a mode of processing with a man- (or God-) created activity. Religion becomes not the defining characteristic of spiritual intelligence, but rather one of a number of domains in which that form of intelligence can be utilized.

Strong feelings exist on the general topic of whether there is, or is not, a spiritual intelligence—and, if so, how best to delineate it—and it is not likely that these will be easily altered. Some of these strong feelings probably reflect deep belief systems. I would suggest, however, that the differences might also reflect personal stylistic preferences.

Put succinctly, I am intellectually a splitter, whereas I suspect Emmons is a lumpner. That is, I like to make distinctions and I also believe that intellectual progress is likely to follow if the *right* distinctions are proposed. My assumption is that

Emmons is attracted to the discovery of relations among items, perhaps especially far-stretching relations, and that he believes intellectual progress is tied to these connections.

Let me offer two “cases in point.” In reading through his article, I was struck by the large number of allusions to items that fall under the rubric of spirituality. Emmons (this issue) speaks of “virtuous behavior,” “ultimate concern,” “intimacy with the divine,” “personal striving,” “the long view,” “humility,” and “integration of self concept”—and these are but a partial sampling. I may have pleasant associations to many of these phrases but I am far from certain that they all refer to the same concept and, indeed, I would appreciate having them teased apart.

A second case in point has to do with the sweep of the term *intelligence* itself. I plead guilty to the charge of having stretched the term myself. Still, I believe that it belongs most properly in the realm of cognition, which is currently connected to forms of information processing. Emmons, however, is much more promiscuous in his use of the term *intelligence*. As I read his opening pages, I note that he sees intelligence as tied to motivation, emotions, personality, and morality. Now I have no doubt that if these terms make scientific sense, it is important to be able to connect them to one another. But that is a different endeavor from one that seeks to erase the distinctions among these psychological dimensions. I am leery of so stretching the term *intelligence* that it sacrifices its primary ties with cognition and instead becomes cognate with the human psyche in all of its wondrous dimensions.

Finally, I have to record my own hesitation about the closing of Emmons’s article. I sympathize with his interest in promoting the scholarly study of religion and I believe that his own article contributes to that worthy end. However, the desire to stimulate a line of study does not permit one to conflate analysis with advocacy. Spirituality is worthy of study as an intelligence if that lens illuminates its nature; the possibility that it may encourage more study of religion, or improve religion’s place in the world, is not in my mind a proper rationale. I know whereof I speak because my own work on multiple intelligences has often been drawn on as a justification for arts education. I happen to be a staunch advocate of arts education, but I have often had to explain that there is no such thing as artistic intelligence.

In sum, then, I applaud Emmons’s investigation although, in the end, I come to a different set of conclusions. We read the data somewhat differently, and my criteria for an intelligence are less flexible than his. I also believe that our different conclusions follow, to some extent, from different intellectual styles, with myself as an inveterate splitter and Emmons, I suspect, as an avid lumpner. A number of the points that he makes seem well worth following up through further analytic and empirical investigations; I hope that he is invigorated to pursue these consequential issues by the exchanges in these pages.

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